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Abstract The current paradigm shift from realism and humanism to social constructionism and postmodernism has tremendous implications for social sciences, especially for psychology. The idea that not only our knowledge, but also our self, emotions and cognitions are constructed by society and culture is embraced by some cross-cultural and cultural psychologists and postmodernists. While this stance attempts to integrate culture and psychology, it depreciates the part of the self that can stand apart from culture and society and therefore be shared among humankind. This paper proposes a layered model of selfhood to incorporate both universal and existential human experience and the influence of culture and society. Heine, Lehman, Markus and Kitayama’s (1999) cross-cultural study of self-regard serves as an exemplar of the constructionist approach and their data are reanalyzed using the proposed model of selfhood. The notion of ‘play’ is introduced to understand the dynamics at the interface between cultural regulations and individuals. This paper also explores the cultural norms of East Asia and America.

Key Words collective society, individualistic society, layered selfhood, play, self-regard, self-way

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Playing as Adaptation? Layered Selfhood and Self-regard in Cultural Contexts

In the past few decades, a paradigm shift has fundamentally changed the way we understand the world and ourselves. The belief that society and culture construct not only our knowledge, but also reality itself, as well as ourselves as persons, and our emotions and cognition, has tremendous implications for the social sciences and especially for psychology. As Gergen (1991) tells us, in the postmodern era, ‘the very concept of personal essences is thrown into doubt. Selves as possessors of real and identifiable characteristics—such as rationality, emotion, inspiration, and will—are dismantled’ (p. 7). In some scholarly circles, it is almost a ‘taboo’ (Chandler, 2000, p. 210; Polkinghorne, 2000, p. 266) to seek anything of our selfhood that is not constructed by history and
Culture. This constructionist/postmodernist trend in the Western world is especially enthusiastically embraced in American intellectual circles, where the indigenous form of philosophy, pragmatism, and the indigenous form of sociology, symbolic interactionism all hold a constructionist view of the world and human selfhood.

This paradigm shift is paralleled by the ‘sea change’ that Spiro (1990) observed in anthropology. For some anthropologists, the culturally constructed human worlds differ from each other not in the trivial sense that snowflakes, for example, differ from each other, ‘but in the radical sense that each is incommensurable’ (p. 52). The ‘others’, while no longer theoretically inferior to us, are now completely ‘alien’ from us.

For if every human group inhabits its own culturally constituted conceptual world, and if the concepts of any one are incommensurate with those of any other, then there is no way by which the members of one group can translate the cultural concepts of any other group. (p. 52)

Therefore, for members of any group, ‘the other groups are not only strange; they are fundamentally and irreducibly strange’. They are ‘wholly Other—unknown, because unknowable’ (p 52).

However, if human beings are ‘fundamentally products of social discourse’ (Gergen, 1981a, p. 4), if there is nothing about the self that ‘stands apart from history and culture’ (Chandler, 2000, p. 210), how can the individual act autonomously within his/her social and cultural environment? The pre-colonial Western idea of bounded, even isolated, human selves that ‘carry their uniqueness deep inside themselves’ (Burkitt, 1991, p. 1) and have no connections whatsoever to other human beings and their environment lacks a crucial understanding of how much these elements are related; however, despite this shortcoming, it ‘contains a grasp of the human spirit we cannot afford to lose’ (Zhao, 2003, p. 82). However justifiable the deconstruction of the deeply ingrained Western view of the self, the substitute for it, a completely constructed self, renders individual agency unaccounted for.

This intellectual climate has also influenced cultural psychologists and some of us have quickly adopted a social constructionist/postmodernist perspective. While as a field, cultural psychology is meant to capture the role of culture in the reality of the psychological life of human beings, a social constructionist/postmodernist orientation overemphasizes the influence of culture on the human psyche. With this orientation we believe the self is made possible only through cultural self-ways: the cultural scripts for the self. This basic theoretical stance has informed studies which claim that there are no universal life experiences (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999); that culture
and the self are inextricably intertwined and mutually constituted (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1997; Greenfield, 1997; Shweder, 1990; Triandis, 1989); and that cultural patterns shape people’s emotions, cognition and motivation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). When discussing Mead’s concept of self, Hewitt (1989) commented: ‘Without some ways to grasp the creative and resistive element of the person, symbolic interactionists are left with an “over-socialized” conception of humankind’ (p. 179). The same is true for the social constructionism/postmodernism-oriented cultural psychologists: without a way to grasp the unconstructed element of the individual, we are left with a determinist view of human selfhood. The implications drawn from the deconstruction of the Western essentialist view of the individual and from the fact that some cultures have different conceptualizations of the self are extended too far in implying that humans have no essential properties and are completely malleable objects (Polkinghorne, 2000).

But how do we account for the individual’s active role in his/her cultural environment? If we do not want to retreat to the much-challenged and questionable Leibnizian monadological self, and if we take into account the dynamics at the interface between culture and the individual, a cultural psychology perspective that embraces both cultural constructions and human unstructured experience is crucial. In this paper, I propose a model of selfhood that incorporates universal and existential human experience and the influence of culture and society, and addresses the possibility of the individual’s cooperation with and resistance to the culture. Using Heine et al.’s (1999) article, ‘Is There a Universal Need for Positive Self-regard?’ I analyze how the self acts concerning self-regard in different cultural contexts. Heine et al.’s article is based on a project funded by social science and humanity research organizations from both Canada and Japan and contains a thorough survey of research done on this topic. I use this study not only because it contains data that are more comprehensive than those in other studies, but also because I regard it as an exemplar of the social constructionist/postmodernist orientation in cultural psychology. Reanalyzing their data can demonstrate how different theoretical perspectives in cultural psychology can inform empirical research and therefore produce different results.

The Layered Model of Selfhood

There is no doubt that the cultural and social environment does to a certain degree influence the forming of the human self and psychological processes, especially considering the fact that language, our
social product, is the means by which the individual conceptualizes his/her experience and the world. The key issue for debate is to what extent and in what ways the self and psychological processes are influenced by the cultural and social environment. While it seems so evident a phenomenon that the individual is working with pre-existing cultural self-ways, what is often ignored in the debate is the question, ‘Where do the self-ways come from in the first place?’ It seems to me that, as humans, our phenomenological-existential experiences have constituted the foundations for the formation of cultures as well as cultural self-ways. Cultures, Ruth Benedict (1959) has claimed, always selectively choose from the whole range of universal human experiences and leave some experiences untuned. Also, as Spiro (1984) argues, since cultures are traditional, collective and symbolic, logically they cannot exhaust human experience; there is always a part of the experience that is not encoded in collective signs, and therefore is not transmitted by means of intentional enculturative processes. To use Dilthey’s term, ‘total, full experience, without truncations’ (in Marias, 1967, p. 379), cannot be fully represented in cultures.

One argument made by some social constructionist/postmodernist-minded psychologists is that while some human experiences may not be chosen and encoded in culture, by the very fact that they are not chosen and encoded, and are therefore cognitively unelaborated, they no longer exist. The experiences are ‘starved’ and eliminated from people’s psyche. Heine et al. (1999) assert that,

... behaviors that do not fit well with the self-way will remain cognitively unelaborated .... It is through this process of finding resonance with the cultural system that cultures come to shape how individuals think, feel, and perceive themselves and their social worlds. (pp. 767–768)

The underlying assumption is that the existence of our experiences depends upon elaboration. However, there is no evidence for such a huge assumption. Our daily created and lived experience is not produced by articulation and thus is not eliminated by the lack of articulation. We have learned from childhood that feelings like ‘sometimes I touch my dad’s body and it’s all hairy so it feels weird’ (Tobin, 1995, p. 244) are unspeakable; however, these kinds of feelings do not disappear from our experience. We can lose awareness of our experiences by not elaborating them, but we do not therefore lose the experiences.

Another way to argue that our experience is completely malleable and subject to construction is offered by Kenneth J. Gergen. Gergen (1981b), surveying a set of studies that find people’s experiences of emotion and cognitive process to be generally a ‘murk’ and the defining
and labeling of them to be influenced by environmental contexts, also concludes that the ‘inner experience of self is essentially constructed, and the form of this construction does not appear to be driven or determined by the experience itself’ (p. 62). He states,

It has been traditionally maintained, both within the social sciences and society in general, that if the individual can but delve beneath the superficial overlay of everyday activity, he or she may locate a true and genuine basis for identity. If one can but look inward examining carefully his or her feelings, thoughts, hopes, fears, motives, and so on, one can discover a true self, an experiential bedrock for identity... As can now be seen, to look inward for a clear and defining experience that may serve as an anchor for identity is not likely to yield success. Rather, in looking inward one primarily faces an obscure morass which may, with effort, yield up most any answer one faces (or fears). (p. 62)

The argument is that since the defining and the labeling of our experience are influenced by given circumstances, the experience itself can be constructed in almost any way. However, what the empirical evidence indicates is that our conceptualization (defining and labeling) of our experience is malleable. To jump to the conclusion, as many postmodernists do, that our experience itself is therefore also subject to any way of construction, or is even non-existent, is logically flawed. Our general state of experience (arousal, cognitive process, etc.) may be murky or morass-like, but it is real and it is produced by our daily encounters with the environment. Language, on the other hand, has no direct connections to the things it signifies (de Saussure, 1974); it is an arbitrary and conventional means to conceptualize our unstructured experience; therefore, it requires that our experience be ‘truncated’ or ‘channeled’ to fit its structure. Many philosophers have warned us that language and conceptualization are limited compared to the richness of our experience. ‘Dilthey firmly believes that human understanding can never exhaust the real and that in the real there will always remain something unknowable and ineffable’ (Crotty, 1998, p. 93). Adorno (1973) also states that no concept can ever capture the richness of reality and that concepts ‘will make the crucial differences vanish’ (p. 152). Through defining and labeling, we are reducing the irreducible. Cultures only expose the tip of the iceberg of our experience—the part that is chosen to be highlighted and the part that can be highlighted in a symbolic, collective and traditional manner.

The understanding of our deep-seated experience may benefit from a phenomenological approach. From a phenomenological viewpoint, cultures, our habits and manners of seeing the world, our taken-for-granted notions, may get in the way of our understanding human
existence, but the ‘unadulterated’ (Heron, 1992) human existence is there, and it is possible for us to ‘recover a fresh perception’ of it (Sadler, 1969, p. 377). Maybe endorsing the concept that the phenomenological self holds all our existential experiences which are murky and pre-conceptual will help us understand the universality of being human and the resources the person has when taking an active role in a cultural and social environment.

On the other hand, that our conceptualization (defining and labeling) of our experience is malleable is also due to the fact that when we conceptualize experiences, we are actively taking into consideration cultural and social conventions and expectations. The studies that Gergen (1981b) examined clearly indicate that the subjects labeled their feelings according to conventions and values. I would add that their labeling was also influenced by their willingness to cooperate with the values, their possession of adequate language to express them, and other factors. Our selves are not passively shaped or ‘constructed’ by whatever the cultural self-way is; rather, abundant phenomena have revealed a regulating inner self behind all outcomes (self-reports, self-presentations, observable public behaviors, etc.).

In social psychology, discrepancies between people’s public self and private self are well documented (e.g. Buss, 2001; Snyder, 1987; Tedeschi, 1986). Snyder (1987) notes,

Most people assume that each of us has one and only one true self, but this is not always so. Some people act as if they have not one, but many selves. Moreover, in spite of the widespread belief that the self is an integral feature of personal identity, for many people, it seems to be largely a product of their relationships with other people. These people exhibit striking gaps and contradictions between the public appearances and the private realities of the self. (p. 4)

As Tedeschi (1986) points out, ever since William James provided the classic view of the self, ‘it has been generally accepted that there are public and private aspects to the self’ (p. 2). The discrepancy between these two selves has led to the birth of theories such as the socioanalytic development of personality (Hogan, 1982), self-monitoring theory (Snyder, 1987), self-verification (Swann, 1984), self-consciousness and control (Carver & Scheier, 1985), and the self as audience for self-presentations (Greenwald & Breckler, 1985). In addressing the everyday phenomenon of self-presentation, Goffman (1967, 1974) argues that, although we hardly realize it, the basic pattern of human activities is really an act of play across situations and frames. In our daily lives, we aptly transfer among different frames/reals/laminations and we are very capable of manipulating boundaries. When we greet our
neighbors in the morning, we are acting in one kind of frame, but when we go to a bar at night, we are acting in another. We are inclined to work transformations ‘for fun, deception, experiment, rehearsal, dream, fantasy, ritual, demonstration, analysis, and charity’ (Goffman, 1974, p. 560). In this light, cultural scripts, among others, only provide conventions, rules and realms with which people can cooperate and play. Goffman’s (1959) impression management theory clearly indicates that there is ‘a distinction between the self as a character and as a performer’ (Burkitt, 1991, p. 59) and hence a regulating and controlling inner self. What is interesting and ironical, though, is that Goffman struggled to negate the possibility of an inner regulating self that stands apart from situations. He maintained that self ‘is not an entity half-concealed behind events, but a changeable formula for managing oneself during them’ (Goffman, 1974, p. 574). For him, as for some other social self theorists from a constructionist perspective (e.g. Mead), an inner self as an entity standing apart from culture and society is something to be denied at all cost, and as a result, ‘the person is nothing apart from situated identities and the social framework on which they are hung’ (Hewitt, 1989, p. 168).

With the foregoing discussion, I suggest a model of a layered selfhood that incorporates our unstructured existential experiences, individual agency and the influence of culture and society. This model consists of a phenomenological self at the deepest experiential level, a public self at the outer level, and an inner self regulating, negotiating and co-constructing both with its phenomenological counterpart and with the social and cultural environment.

Our pre-conceptual, ‘un-truncated’, and therefore the richest, daily-created and lived experiences reside in the phenomenological self. The phenomenological self is, therefore, not the product of culture and is not completely malleable in social and cultural contexts, as some social constructionist/postmodernists may suggest. Neither should the phenomenological self be confused with Freud’s ‘id.’ The ‘id’, according to Freud, only accounts for our instinctive and physiological impulses and is the most basic and primitive part of human experiences. The phenomenological self, on the other hand, houses all those rich experiences, the cognitive, the emotional and the physiological, that are unstructured, uncoded and individual. It is the foundation that provides the resources for the individual to take an active role in his/her cultural and social environment. It is also the basis for our understanding of the trans-cultural and universal human reality. As Spiro (1984) notes, because humans have ‘a common biological heritage and common features of social interaction’ (p. 335), the
phenomenological self makes it possible for the individual to grasp what is existentially common and fundamental for all humans. The inner self, on the other hand, ‘consider[s] social conditions, roles, and values, in combination with his/her inner needs and purposes, interpretation of elements, analysis of alternatives, and evaluation of situations to make sense of the world and to take action’ (Zhao, 2003, p. 82). It uses language tools, cultural structures and the ‘publicly available system of intelligibility’ (Fish, 1990, p. 186) to construct both with its phenomenological counterpart and its cultural environment a socially acceptable public self to the world. I prefer ‘inner self’ to ‘private self’, the term popularized in psychological discourse, because ‘private self’ implies that the self acts differently only when alone (which is not necessarily the case) and does not convey the connotation of conscious and unconscious regulating. The inner self is where all the inputs, both from the phenomenological self and from the cultural and social environment, are poured and where the regulation, negotiation and construction take place. It regulates, negotiates and co-constructs both for the purpose of protecting and enhancing the person’s phenomenological-existential well-being and for the purpose of complying with the cultural and social requirements for the person. The outer level of the self that the inner self presents to the world, the public self, therefore, is a self functioning in a cultural environment and compatible with its phenomenological counterpart. It is more likely to be conventional and cultural, the result of regulation and negotiation. Based on this model, when the cultural expectations for the individual have both positive and, most importantly, negative effects on the individual’s psychic well-being, the phenomenological self will experience the effects and input will be sent to the inner self. As a result, play may begin at the level of the inner self.

The Case of Self-regard

In social psychological discourse, it has been a basic assumption that people needed to feel good about themselves. A general good feeling about the self, defined by Ryff and Keyes (1995) as self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relations, purpose in life, personal growth and autonomy, is essential for mental health (Allport, 1955; Epstein, 1973; Maslow, 1943; Rogers, 1951; Steele, 1988; Tesser, 1988). As early as 1890, James proclaimed that a direct feeling of regard for one’s existence is basic to humanity. Becker (1968) indicated that all organisms like to ‘feel good’ about themselves. R. Brown (1986) suggested that a good feeling about one’s self was an ‘urge so deeply
human that we can hardly imagine its absence’ (p. 534). Psychologist J.D. Brown (1998) also argued that across time and culture, there is a basic human need to feel good about one’s self. Being fundamental for human development, positive self-regard is among the basic characteristics of psychological well-being (see Heine et al., 1999, for a review).

Whereas positive self-regard has been assumed universally fundamental for human development, some phenomena seem to contradict its universality. Empirical studies have indicated that Easterners, especially the Japanese, appear to pursue self-criticism, hansei, rather than positive self-regard (de Vos, 1985; Kashiwagi, 1986; Lewis, 1995; Roland, 1988; White, 1987). They habitually see themselves as incomplete and feel unsatisfied with their performance (Doi, 1973). Heine et al. (1999) quoted Kashiwagi: ‘negative evaluation of the self, or strong awareness of weaker aspects of self, is sometimes pointed to as one of the general characteristics of self-concept among the Japanese’ (p. 776). In addition, many researchers have found that self-criticism better characterizes the Japanese experience and that it functions as fuel—driving the Japanese towards self-improvement (Befu, 1986; Doi, 1973; Fiske et al., 1997; Johnson, 1993; Kashiwagi, 1986; Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997; Roland, 1988). Are individuals with evinced self-criticism abnormal or are their cultures dysfunctional?

This is an area where a cultural psychology perspective can play a crucial role. How does culture respond to people’s psychological needs? To what extent can a culture shape the individual’s self? Can or cannot our basic human needs be modified/altered by cultural expectations? However, as a response to these questions, Heine et al.’s (1999) approach is too social constructionist in orientation. They suggest, in ‘Is There a Universal Need for Positive Self-regard?’, that although it has been traditionally assumed to be universally human, in actuality the need for positive self-regard is culturally variable. In other words, our existential need itself can be altered (or constructed) by the cultural expectations. The needs are malleable. Heine et al. argue that in collective societies, self is placed in a network of relationships; therefore the need for positive self-regard is necessarily weak and functionally disconnected for the Japanese person. They assert that different cultures provide different ‘self-ways’ and that people’s selves, their emotional and psychological experiences, are shaped respectively to function as a cultural entity.

In addition, North Americans have shown a highly skewed distribution of self-views. Twenty-five percent of US high school students believe that they are in the top 1 percent of the population with respect
to the ability to get along well with others (Myers, 1987). The center of gravity of the North American self lies remarkably above the theoretical midpoint of the self-evaluation scale (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). A typical North American’s self-evaluation is full of inaccurate and skewed perceptions (Bradley, 1978; Greenwald, 1980; Miller & Ross, 1975; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Typical North Americans think of themselves as more competent than they really are (Taylor & Brown, 1988), remembering their past performance as better than it actually was (Crary, 1966). They take credit for success, attribute failure to the situation (see Zukerman, 1979) and see themselves as better than most others (e.g. Campbell, 1986; Marks, 1984). They have managed a number of ‘cognitive maneuvers’ to allow them to deceive themselves without encountering negative consequences (Greenwald, 1980). Such documented self-serving, self-enhancing biases have been assumed by the psychological discourse to be the result of the natural need for positive self-regard.

However, on the experiential level, Heine et al.’s hypothesis does not seem plausible. After reading their article, a number of Japanese questioned the paper’s thesis because they had often experienced a discrepancy between their modest articulation/presentation and their inner feelings (Heine et al., 1999). Heine et al.’s hypothesis does not leave room for any consideration of a gap between an inner, phenomenological self and an outer, public self, or for the possibility of individual agency. In addition, they confuse self-concept with self-report, and by this virtual confusion they identify people’s behavior representation, their public self, with their internal lives. In discussing the abundant mistreatment of self-report as self-concept in psychological discourse, Combs (1981) clarifies ‘self-concept’ as

... a product of humanistic-phenomenological-experiential psychology designed to explore the internal life of persons. ... Self-report in this frame of reference is a behavior representing what a person is willing, able, or can be seduced to say about self. Like any other behavior, it is, of course, affected by self-concept. It cannot, however, be accepted as identical with it. (p. 6)

From this point of view, the skewed articulations and presentations of self-evaluation of both Americans and East Asians are self-reports (public or private) and should not be taken as indicators of their self-regard, the subject of self-concept—the general feelings about the self.

From the layered model of selfhood I suggest above, the general feeling of the self which is housed in the existential-phenomenological self can stay unaltered while the self-presentation, one aspect of the public self, changes with cultural expectations as a result of the inner...
self’s active negotiation and regulation, both with its inner needs and with the cultural and social environment. When the basic needs that are fundamental for our well-being are threatened, the phenomenological self will send a strong signal to the inner self and the inner self will make a strenuous effort to negotiate with the cultural environment and therefore maintain the person’s psychological well-being. At the same time, the cultural expectations will have to be met in some ways and to some degree. As a result, play has to happen at the inner self level to resolve the tension. The dramatically different self-reports presented by North Americans and East Asians are thus more likely to be the results of their negotiation and playing with their dramatically different cultural expectations, than to represent their different—culturally altered—psychological needs.

In the following, I will explore the background cultural norms of both East Asia and North America and explore how, when the cultural regulations have positive or negative impact on psychological well-being, individuals cope and play with the cultural regulations while trying to maintain their universal need for self-acceptance and positive self-regard.

North American Cultural Norms for Self-regard

As mentioned above, a number of researchers have demonstrated that unrealistic optimism bias, false uniqueness bias and positive illusions are abundant in North Americans’ self-reports (Heine et al., 1999). These illusion-like self-images go far beyond what is needed for basic human self-affirmation. Logically, the attainment of future success requires accurate assessment of a performance and investigation into the causes of failure and success. Having knowledge about one’s particular deficits doesn’t necessarily damage one’s self-feeling. An evaluation of one’s basic well-being can to a great extent affect one’s general feeling about oneself, but a positive self-feeling does not necessarily reject deficits in particular aspects of the self. Hence, the North Americans’ biased presentations of self-regard should not be identified as normal positive self-regard and justified as a panhuman psychological need.

But why do North Americans have such unrealistic, sometimes harmful, views of self? Don’t we foster ideals such as honesty and self-consistence? What does North American culture expect from the self? As Gergen (1973) once commented, much of the social psychological research can be best understood as psychological counterparts to Western cultural norms. When we see the abhorrence of negative self-views and the sanctioned self-evaluation represented in North
American discourse (Antonucci & Jackson, 1983; Baumeister, 1993; Dawes, 1994; Diener, 1984; Leary, 1983; Taylor & Brown, 1988), we see that North American culture indeed cherishes an overly positive self view. The reason, I would argue, is that the overly positive self-report (public and private) is essential for an individualistic cultural enterprise, and such self-reports have been confirmed throughout historical discourses.

Deeply embedded in North American individualistic culture are the celebration of the individual as an actor and a conscious effort to reconstruct the individual as an inner being. An idealized human actor is the agent and his/her rationality and trustworthiness is the premise of the entire cultural enterprise. The actor’s ability and performance have to be reliable and presumed. On the other hand, the individual’s inner domain, which may be inconsistent with the idealized image, needs to be readjusted or reconstructed to be in accordance with his/her rational and reliable representation. In a historical study of American individualism, I argue (Zhao, 2005) that the cultural ways of ‘thinking about human beings and acting upon them’ deliberately ignore, alienate and remold the inner being. In this situation, when self-report is concerned, having strong confidence in one’s capacity and performance and a positive attitude towards this capacity and performance is crucial for individualistic cultural discourse. But the objective evaluation of real feelings about one’s self and performance does not seem important. Indeed, any negative or vague feeling about one’s self and performance should be ignored and depreciated because of the possible detrimental effects on the cultural enterprise.

Additionally, the culturally optimistic view about social construction of the world and the human self that is at the heart of North American intellectual traditions—its indigenous philosophy, linguistics and sociology, as well as many of its social practices, such as ‘the power of positive thinking’—also contributes to this overly positive self-report. Anthropological linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) believed that the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which have to be organized, and are therefore determined, by our linguistic systems (p. 213). If all truth is constructed by us, and if the signifier (language) has the power to determine the signified (the thing itself), then if we elaborate on our failure, the failure is attributed through language to the self. Failure becomes a property of the self. On the other hand, if we attribute success to the self, or if we organize a positively biased presentation of our self, this presentation can somehow become a real part of the self. Indeed, concepts are somehow joined to reality in the North American mind. We believe in the power of the
human construction of reality so much that a positive articulation of self is deemed absolutely necessary.

Hence, it is necessary and possible in North American individualistic culture for people to articulate a skewed but more acceptable self-report. It was to meet cultural expectations, rather than basic human needs, that the North American participants presented such a skewed view of themselves.

**East Asian Cultural Norms for Self-regard**

Empirically, Japanese and East Asians exhibit a self-report tendency that is opposite to that of their North American counterparts. In experiments, East Asians marked their performance as being worse than their peers on intelligence tests. They were more sensitive to information indicating that they were doing worse than others than to information indicating that they were doing better than others. They exhibited a strong self-critical motivation rather than self-enhancement motivation, and in their daily lives, they encouraged self-criticism (see Heine et al., 1999). In contrast to the heavily skewed distributions found in North American studies of self-esteem, Japanese’ mean self-esteem scores approach the theoretical midpoint of the scale (Diener & Diener, 1995). The bottom line is that, unlike their North American counterparts, they do not have self-evaluation distributions that are skewed towards inflation (Campbell et al., 1996; Diener & Diener, 1995). When an abstract and theoretical evaluation of self is expected, and when specific aspects of their selves are examined, they tend to underestimate themselves and look for problems and deficits more frequently than North Americans.

Again, why are the self-reports among the East Asians, especially the Japanese, more modest than those of North Americans? The same question remains: what do the cultures expect from the self? The key to the answers to these questions lies in the orientation of these cultures. Highly influenced by Confucianism, Eastern cultures emphasize harmonious relationships among people and strive to curb people’s natural selfishness and self-centeredness for the benefit of society. As voluntary participants in cultural operations, individuals are supposed to focus on their obligations and make an effort to cooperate with others. Modesty and self-criticism are strongly encouraged because, ironically, in East Asian cultures it is acknowledged that people need to feel good about themselves, and if the individual is modest, others around him/her will feel good. So this is an ‘other’-orientated individual behavior pattern. If anything, calling attention to
oneself in a way that enhances one’s own attributes weakens the solidarity of the group (de Vos, 1985; Nakane, 1970). Instead, notions such as self-discipline, perseverance and endurance are strongly encouraged in these cultures. The cultures also set up an external frame of reference, the facework, with which to monitor the individual’s behavior.

In addition, while encouraging self-criticism, these cultures are aware that too much self-criticism is somewhat contrary to human nature or human needs, and therefore the encouragement of self-criticism is rationalized along the line of self-improvement. According to this rationale, to chronically view the self as incomplete implies the need to strive to make up for one’s deficits (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). Showing good feelings about the self is interpreted as revealing ‘one’s failure to recognize a higher standard of excellence and thus to continue to self-improve’ (Heine et al., 1999, p. 785), and a ‘feeling of satisfaction with oneself’ can ‘reduce the perceived need to continue one’s efforts’ (p. 770). Following this logic, Eastern cultures highlight the positive consequences of self-criticism instead of enforcing it only as an external social principle.

Furthermore, to reduce the possible psychological suffering caused by this particular cultural regulation, these cultures legitimize a discrepancy between the way people cope with cultural regulations and their internal feelings. In Japanese culture, it is culturally acceptable, or even encouraged, for the individual to have a public self with which to conduct human affairs, including postures, languages and presentations as a means for playing in that frame, and a private self to preserve the individual’s own feelings (Bachnik, 1994; Doi, 1986; Johnson, 1993; Lebra, 1976). Doi (1974) discusses how Japanese consciously know that there is a distinction between ‘real feeling versus accepted principle’ and do not consider the distinction hypocritical. Underlying self-feelings and experiences thus are acknowledged to exist and are tacitly recognized and shared among people.

Consistently, the Eastern style of communication is highly suggestive, relying ‘heavily upon intuition and empathy’ (Clancy, 1986). What is articulated resembles a posture, but what is implied is authentic. In contrast to Americans’ reliance upon words to communicate feelings, Easterners tend not to articulate feelings. Words can sometimes mean the opposite of what they seem, or different meanings can be delivered independent of the words that are spoken. Hence, it would not be surprising that even though Japanese individuals have good feelings about themselves, their self-regard, articulation and presentation emphasize the weak part of their performance.

With all these cultural regulations and mechanisms, it is possible and
expected for individuals to construct a modest or even negative self-report. Nevertheless, from the layered model of selfhood, when cultural operations have psychological consequences for the individual’s well-being, as in the case of North Americans, coping and playing will be initiated at the inner self level for the individual to adapt to the cultural environment.

Playing as Adaptation

How the inner self responds to cultural expectations depends on how strong the cultural regulations are and how serious the consequences will be to the individual’s well-being, which are inevitably experienced by the phenomenological self. Psychologically, the North American cultural expectation for a skewed positive self-report is highly consistent with our ‘universal need to feel good about ourselves’. No acute and direct inner conflict is experienced by the phenomenological self. Having a skewed positive self-report is much easier than having a skewed negative self-report; therefore at the inner self level, the individual is at ease in adapting to this particular cultural expectation. Even though there are discrepancies between the deep-seated phenomenological experience of the self and the self-presentation, only a ‘passive mode’ (Schlenker, 1986) is generated at the inner self level and people tend to continue to articulate themselves very positively. The underlying objective self-evaluation has gone unarticulated, and unless the expression of this objective self-evaluation becomes necessary, people are content with their skewed self-report. In addition, believing in one’s performance and ability encourages one to persevere. Such beliefs might not help individuals identify their problems, but they provide people with a beneficial psychological condition for achieving their dreams.

However, a constant overly positive self-view may prevent the person from improving his/her own performance effectively, and failure has a direct impact on the psyche. A stark gap between the self-report and others’ evaluation can also be hard for the person to bear and cause psychological difficulties. In situations like these, as in the case of East Asians, negative psychological consequences appear and are acutely experienced by the phenomenological self. The phenomenological self will then input strong signals to the inner self and, as a result, an active, conscious or subconscious process, the ‘active mode’ (Schlenker, 1986), will be generated at the inner self level to renegotiate. As Schlenker (1986) describes it in his discussion of the ‘private self’s’ response to self-presentation:
In contrast to the passive mode, the active mode involves a more thoughtful consideration of the implications of one's self-presentations and the contexts in which they occur. It constitutes a more intensive processing of information that goes beyond surface features and involves argumentation (documenting and counterarguing) designed to reaffirm desired identity images. This assessment engages both the cognitive and motivational facets of the actor’s identity. (p. 46)

For North Americans, the renegotiations may lead to more conscious effort to assess their performance accurately and actively acquire information necessary for improvement. On the surface, however, they may still maintain an overly positive self-report, for the purpose of self-encouragement and for meeting cultural and social expectations. A process of playing as adaptation is thus on the way.

For East Asians, on the other hand, the cultural regulation of presenting a modest/negative self-image goes directly against our existential human needs. The psychological consequences are much more poignant for East Asians’ phenomenological selves than are the consequences experienced by their North American counterparts. The active mode in which the inner self renegotiates is therefore more intense, and numerous strategies will be created to deal with the situation. To protect the psychic well-being of the individual, the inner self’s strategies of cooperating with the cultural expectation will have a stronger sense of play-like pretending. As Spiro (1984) observes, sometimes cultural frames can become ‘cultural clichés’—“propositions to which actors may give nominal assent but which are not ‘internalized’ by them as personal beliefs’ (p. 326)—if to comply with them means a negative impact on people’s psychic well-being.

One strategy is for individuals, while nominally emphasizing in their self-reports what they could have achieved rather than the greatness of what they have already achieved, to steadfastly maintain their generally positive view of themselves in the overall self-evaluation. This strategy is shown in the Japanese distribution of self-esteem. As noted above, in contrast to North Americans’ heavily skewed distribution of self-esteem, the mean self-esteem scores of Japanese only approach the theoretical midpoint of the scale (Diener & Diener, 1995). Even though the culture encourages an elaboration of negative features of the self, Japanese still possess normal, positive feelings of themselves. There are no data indicating that, when an overall evaluation of the self is required, the reports are negatively skewed. It is only when a particular aspect of the self is evaluated that the Japanese tend to emphasize the unsatisfactory part of their performance.

Another strategy is for individuals to conform to cultural operations...
only on abstract and theoretical levels, but to reaffirm their desired self-images in direct and concrete situations where a negative self-report threatens and hurts their feelings. One study shows that Japanese individuals have levels of implicit self-regard similar to those of North Americans (Heine et al., 1999). Their reaction time in associating themselves with unpleasant words such as vomit and poison, and pleasant words such as happy and sunshine, is comparable to that of their North American counterparts (Farnham & Greenwald, 1998; see Heine et al., 1999). In this case, associating themselves with those unpleasant words is discordant with their inner feelings of self, and therefore they resist doing so. Another study along this line was conducted by Tesser, Campbell, and Smith (1984) and replicated by Isozaki and Takahashi (Isozaki, 1994; Isozaki & Takahashi, 1988, 1993). In this series of studies, the Japanese participants overestimated their own performance on relevant activities compared to an overestimation of their friends’ performances on irrelevant activities (Isozaki, 1994; Isozaki & Takahashi, 1988, 1993). According to the cultural norms, they should overestimate the performance of a close other in both relevant and irrelevant activities, and underestimate their own, but they did not. Psychologically, the participants could afford to think that those close to them were better at the things that the participants did not care very much about, but they could not afford to think the same regarding the things that were important to them.

The strategies show how strenuous and persistent the inner self is in renegotiating and playing with the cultural environment to protect the person’s psychological well-being. They also show how strong the cultural regulations are in making the individual a functioning member of the cultural environment. When the cultural expectations change, however, and when the individual is willing to adapt to another cultural environment, the self-report will soon change to be more in accordance with the individual’s inner feelings. Japanese subjects who were exposed to North American culture demonstrated the imperative to change in their self-reports. Studies (Heine & Lehman, 1997, 1999) show significant correlation between the exposure length of Japanese individuals to North American culture and increases in their self-esteem reports, and between the degree to which they are willing to be acculturated and the change in their self-reports.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued against some cultural psychologists’ social constructionist/postmodernist views of the self, which suggest either
that the self is the product of culture or that the self as an entity does not exist at all but is completely malleable in social and cultural contexts. I have proposed a layered model of selfhood consisting of a phenomenological self, an inner self and a public self, a model that incorporates both universal and existential human experience and the influence of culture and society. Heine et al. (1999)’s cross-cultural study of self-regard exemplifies the social constructionist/postmodernist approach, and their data were reanalyzed using the new model of selfhood to illustrate how the self acts in its cultural environment. I have suggested that the phenomenological-existential self houses our daily created and lived experience, and since humans have ‘a common biological heritage and common features of social interaction’ (Spiro, 1984, p. 335), it provides the basis for our understanding of the transcultural and universal human reality. The inner self regulates, negotiates and co-constructs both with its phenomenological counterpart and with the social and cultural environment to present to the world a public self, a self functioning in a cultural environment and compatible with its phenomenological counterpart. In the case of self-regard, while both East Asians and North Americans have the same psychological need to feel good about themselves, their articulation and presentation of self-regard are the outcomes of the self’s negotiation and cooperation with its cultural regulations. In articulating/presenting their self-regard, people are consciously or unconsciously playing with their cultural frames, while deep inside, they carry the same psychological needs across cultures and situations.

Notes

1. Most of the studies conducted in the Eastern cultural context were with Asians, especially Japanese participants. The results present a similar pattern compared to that of Americans, European-Canadians and European-Australians. Heine et al. (1999) explain that the reason for selecting these two particular cultures (Japanese and North American) is that

   ... they are best represented in the self literature among East Asian and Western cultures, respectively. Other cultures likely possess similar psychological and cultural experiences to these two, and to the extent that they do, we expect that our discussion would generalize to them. (pp. 766–767)

2. See note 1.

References


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Biography
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